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Critical Friends: The Benefits of Instructional Coaches

By Peter DeWitt on March 19, 2013 6:15 AM

"Instructional coaches are onsite professional developers who work collaboratively with teachers, empowering them to incorporate research-based instructional methods into their classrooms." Jim Knight

Relationships matter in education. Quite honestly, they matter in every profession. Educators work many years with most of the same colleagues, and often teach sibling after sibling. Bill Daggett, the Founder and Chairman of the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE) has always made relationships a focus of his presentations and core mission.

The reality is that without fostering positive relationships, we don't grow as professionals. In an **interview with Daggett**, he said, "ICLE looked at the nation's most rapidly improving schools in a five year initiative with Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). We found that they evaluate students and staff around four different learning criteria - and relationships are essential to those learning criteria."

If we look at our own experiences as teachers and principals, we know relationships are one of the most important things we leave with at the end of a career. We all work with colleagues who are also trusted friends. We have parents who we hear from that no longer have children in our schools. They send an e-mail or find us on Facebook in an effort to maintain a connection.

If relationships didn't matter, social networking would not be as important to our lives as it is today. People are on Facebook and Twitter to maintain connections with old friends and family but also new colleagues in their PLN. One new relationship that matters in schools is that of instructional coaches and the teachers they serve.

Instructional coaches seem to be a new phenomenon in schools. Their job is to help educators become better teachers. They observe teachers teaching, go over instructional data, and model good teaching practices. As much as this may be new for schools, the core of instructional coaching has been around for a long time.

Critical Friends

When I was a new teacher, I taught 30 first graders in a city school. I had a high quality student teaching experience, countless hours of observations, and a good network of friends to help me maintain my sanity. However, as I look back now, I could not have made it through that first few years without the help of my colleagues.

I was the general education teacher, Jo was the speech pathologist who serviced the students, and Anna was the special education teacher who worked with me. We co-taught and I learned a great deal from the two of them. I was from upstate, New York and I thought I was teaching in a huge city school in Poughkeepsie, and Anna was from the Bronx who felt otherwise. The school seemed more suburban to her.

Over the few years I worked with Jo and Anna I learned a lot. Not just about special education students but about good teaching practices that were good for all students. They watched and intervened and we met during lunch and after school. Not because we had to but because we wanted to. I became a better teacher because of their input.

Instructional coaches, when done correctly, do the same thing. Consultant, educator and leadership expert **Jim Knight** has done a great deal of work around instructional coaching. In his **study with the University of Kansas**, Knight studied the impact of instructional coaches. Knight says, "Instructional coaches are onsite professional developers who work collaboratively with teachers, empowering them to incorporate research-based instructional methods into their classrooms."

Knight says instructional coaches employ the following seven practices:

- **Enrolls the teacher** - they conduct one-to-one interviews with each teacher prior to the experience.
- **Engages in collaborative planning** - The coach meets with the collaborating teacher to discuss how a new teaching practice can be implemented effectively.
- **Models the lesson** - The coach must model the lesson in the collaborating teacher's classroom while the teacher observes.
- **Teacher-directed post conference** - Both parties must meet to discuss what the teacher observed the coach doing while modeling the lesson.
- **Coach observes the lesson** - It's the teacher's turn to teach the lesson.
- **Exploring data together** - The coach and teacher discuss the data gathered during mutual observations.
- **Providing continued support** - This is a continuous relationship that needs to be fostered over the year.

In addition, according to Knight, instructional coaches are grounded in the following seven principles:

- **Equality** - Instructional coaches and teachers are equal partners.

- **Choice** - Teachers should have a choice regarding what and how they learn.
- **Voice** - Professional learning should empower and respect the voices of teachers.
- **Dialogue** - Professional learning should enable authentic dialogue.
- **Reflection** - Reflection is an integral part of professional learning.
- **Praxis** - Teachers should apply their learning to their real-life practice as they are learning.
- **Reciprocity** - Instructional coaches should expect to get as much as they give.

Knight says, "A coach is a trusted friend to educators, a colleague, a sounding board, and a witness to the good. These days can be difficult for educators, with increased expectations, decreased funding, more pressure and less encouragement. Coaches provide an incredibly important service by listening, empathizing, and encouraging their colleagues respectfully and nonjudgmentally."

Over the years, we have sometimes called them critical friends and other times we have been blessed with great co-teachers who have helped us along the way. A partner that helps us become a better educator is an invaluable relationship. Jim Knight's research on instructional coaches really provides a framework to help school districts establish a high quality instructional coach approach. However, it also helps the co-teaching and critical friend process as well.

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This all sounds like great collaborative egalitarian process! Equality, choice, voice, dialogue, reflection, praxis, reciprocity. Too bad we don't give our young people the same respect in schools!

<http://www.leftparent.com/blog/2011/12/09/15-things-students-want-the-nation-to-know-about-education/>

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"There is one thing that is common to every individual, relationship, team, family, organization, nation, economy, and civilization throughout the world — one thing which, if removed, will destroy the most powerful government, the most successful business, the most thriving economy, the most influential leadership, the greatest friendship, the strongest character, the deepest love. On the other hand, if developed and leveraged, that one thing has the potential to create unparalleled success and prosperity in every dimension of life. Yet it is the least understood, most neglected, and most underestimated possibility of our time. That one thing is trust."

— S.M.R. Covey, 2008

THE CHARACTER of a COACH

SUCCESS DEPENDS ON TRUSTWORTHINESS

By Kay Psencik

The elementary school's teachers lounge was an active center for meeting and collegial conversation — and the place to find out the latest news on anyone and everything. So it was no surprise one day to walk in on a group of teachers with their heads huddled together, shooting glances over their shoulder as the door opened.

As they continued their conversation, the gasps and whispers signaled that what they were saying probably wasn't going to be helpful to anyone. In fact, one teacher was sharing a destructive rumor about a colleague whose students had scored very well on a recent round of districtwide common assessments.

The school's staff had begun analyzing these data in their professional learning teams. The allegation being made was that the teacher whose students had done well had helped them cheat on the test. Of course, there was no validity to the accusation; however, the teachers in the lounge seemed to all agree and laughed.

The school coach, who was present, didn't dispute the rumor and joined in the laughter. As rumors do, this one spread quickly. The coach even shared it with the principal's secretary. By the end of the school day, emotional tension was high throughout the building. The teacher who was being talked about also heard the rumor — and left the building in tears.

As the story at left illustrates, coaches must be continuously guarded in their language and actions. Coaches can be drawn into casual conversation and make comments that violate trust. Trust, which often takes years to build, can be destroyed in seconds without thought.

By intentionally focusing on trust, however, organizations and individuals can endure fallout from everyday problems and more monumental crises. For example, Isadore Sharp, founder, CEO, and chairman of the Four Seasons hotel chain, attributes much of his organization's success to building trust with employees and customers. "We can't communicate



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effectively across a trust gap. ... So I sat down with our public relations director and detailed a formal credo based on the Golden Rule, the cornerstone of what would be called our corporate culture" (Beslin & Reddin, 2006, p. 1).

Deloitte Canada, like many accounting firms, has had fallout from corporate ethics scandals. In an e-conference of the Deloitte Leaders Forum in June 2005, Deloitte Canada CEO Alan MacGibbon stressed the need for leaders to initiate change and act decisively. "Trust is a concept that is so fundamentally important yet so hard to define, earn, and keep," MacGibbon said. "Moral and ethical leadership is perhaps the single most important contributor to success over the long haul" (Beslin & Reddin, 2006, p. 1).

Stephen M.R. Covey (2008) described 13 trust behaviors: Talk straight, demonstrate respect, create transparency, right wrongs, show loyalty, deliver results, get better, confront reality, clarify expectations, practice accountability, listen first, keep commitments, and extend trust. The coach's role is to help leaders develop and model the character traits that lead to trusting relationships. And a coach's success in doing so depends on the coach's own trustworthiness. Developing trust requires coaches to take on moral leadership and develop bonds with those they coach in order to model trust throughout the school.

In the teachers lounge scenario, an effective coach, knowing her role and how trust was being violated, might have intervened. What might have been the outcome by the end of the day if the coach had asked the group of teachers some thoughtful questions: "I wonder if there is any real evidence that cheating took place? Is what we are talking about right now going to facilitate our working together well in the future or hinder it? What other conversations should we be having right now? I wonder what we could be learning from her classroom, or how her strategies and ideas might contribute to all of our learning?"

The coach might have chosen many questions that would nurture and build trust in the organization, allow others to see the coach as trustworthy, and build positive energy in the organization.

As people focus energy and work on developing their own trustworthiness, they become like a mighty oak tree. In Austin, Texas, an ancient grove of oak trees known as the Council Oaks were, according to Native American legend, the location for launching war parties and for hosting peace treaties. Beneath one of these trees, Native Americans reportedly signed a treaty with settlers, represented by Stephen F. Austin. That tree now is known as the Treaty Oak.

In 1989, the tree was vandalized, poisoned with such a powerful hardwood herbicide that scientists were certain it would die. Lab tests showed the oak had received enough poison to kill 100 trees. However, the Treaty Oak survived. Eight years later, it once again produced a crop of acorns. City workers gathered and germinated the acorns, then distributed the seedlings throughout Texas. Two decades after the poisoning, the tree is thriving, although its shape is a reminder of its struggle to survive. Many Texans see the Treaty Oak as a symbol of strength and endurance.

Like the Treaty Oak, good coaches remain constant, symbols of strength and endurance through life's vicissitudes. People who understand their values and what is important to them are able to nurture relationships. But to build the trust that sustains relationships over time, coaches work to develop at least six traits based on the work of Daniel Goleman (2002), Megan Tschannen-Moran (2004), Julio Olalla (2003), and Stephen Covey (2008).

THE SIX TRUSTY OAK ROOTS

A "trusty oak" coach has six essential deep roots: self-awareness, honesty, sincerity, competence, reliability, and the ability to be other-centered.

1 Self-awareness

Effective coaches have a deep sense of their own values and live by those values in such a way that others cannot doubt their principles. In *The Learning Educator* (2007), Stephanie Hirsh and Joellen Killion state, "Each person lives by a set of principles. Some of our principles are unquestioned and fundamental to who we are. Some are new to us, and through

THE SIX TRUSTY OAK ROOTS

1. SELF-AWARENESS

- What drives me? What inspires me?
- What values guide my actions?
- What contributions do I want to make to the world?
- What is my purpose for living?

2. HONESTY

- How does what I think, do, and say align with my observations of the world?

3. SINCERITY

- How do I act intentionally on my values?

4. COMPETENCE

- What do I do so well that I am credible to others?
- What attitudes and aspirations do I have that inspire me to learn continuously?
- What effect does the technological, global world in which we live have on my competence?
- What results am I most proud of?

5. RELIABILITY

- What do I do to ensure I keep my promises?
- What do I do when I fail to keep my promises?

6. INTENTIONS

- When I am with others, am I truly interested in them and what they have to say?
- Do I genuinely want the best for others on my team and regularly acknowledge their contributions?

our experiences and dialogue we continue to clarify and deepen our understanding of them. Our principles guide our work, thoughts, goals, actions, and decisions" (p. 11). Dennis Sparks (2007) says we become clearer about who we are by making clear our assumptions in writing and by talking with others about them. Effective coaches spend time reflecting on and articulating the principles that guide their actions and attitudes. When self-awareness is practiced regularly as a skill, it becomes an essential part of the coach's character.

2 Honesty

In a training session on strategic planning, administrators in the group were discussing how they shared district student performance data with the public. One participant said he struggled with sharing data when the news was not good. The facilitator, without much thought, agreed.

Then a superintendent spoke up. "Is it really difficult to tell the truth?" he asked.

Although the facilitator and the administrator may have been referring to the challenges of sharing bad news, the superintendent who spoke out never forgot the facilitator's comment. She lost his trust, and he subsequently dismissed all she had to say.

Building trusting relationships is not about how honest we think we are. It is how honest others believe us to be. Truth releases the power of positive change. We build meaningful, healthy relationships and become positive role models for others through self-examination and being honest with ourselves and others.

3 Sincerity

In today's fast-paced world, it is tempting to overcommit and make promises we do not really want to keep. When we hastily respond to an email, glance furtively at a phone

message, or jot a note on a to-do list when with another person, we are not totally focused or present, and that is obvious to the listener. Distractions keep our minds floating from issue to issue and cut our conversations short. The pressures of pending commitments keep us from listening. Effective coaches are truly present in the moment.

Sincerity requires that people follow through on those actions that they really are committed to doing. They plan and schedule appropriate time for those tasks they want to make their priorities.

Praise is another challenge to developing sincerity. When praise is not grounded, others may view it as insincere. "You are great!" and "You do fantastic work!" are examples of unspecific praise. When comments are unconnected to a particular event, others may think, "She always says that, but she has no idea what we do." Beware the habit of giving false praise.

4 Competence

Competent people inspire trust. Competent people have the skills, attitudes, and dispositions to achieve what they say they can. Taking on challenges outside one's area of expertise can be tempting, but staying focused in one's area of competence is essential to having others pay attention to the coach or leader and to feel confident in the leader. The coach's competence gives others the courage to act.

Aggressive learners are most likely to be viewed as competent. As Eric Hoffer states: "In times of drastic change, learners inherit the Earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to work in a world that no longer exists" (2008, p. 32). Competence is developed through continuous learning.

5 Reliability

The root of reliability is the most easily severed as people

attempt more in limited time. Those who are reliable can be counted on to keep their promises. Samuel Hamlin chose to participate in a three-year principal development coalition. In three years, he never missed a session. When his children were sick or he had a crisis at school, he found someone to help him so that he honored his commitment.

At the last session, he seemed tired. The leader asked if he was OK. Hamlin replied, "I am tired. I attended my aunt's funeral yesterday, and I've driven all night to be here this morning." Hamlin's commitments were meaningful to him.

Administrators often find themselves in a meeting running overtime or caught by someone who just has to talk, or lost in a phone call with an angry parent. While these may be excuses for not meeting a commitment, they are not reasons. No matter how many apologies are given, others' recall of the situation will be the failure to honor a commitment.

Phil Blake, president of Bayer, said, "It's all about authenticity ... plus consistency that you will always perform according to the contract of understanding. You're doing the right things for the right reasons and what's best for all" (Beslin & Reddin, 2006, p. 30).

Effective coaches honor others as they would want to be honored. When coaches are transparent, honest, and forthright with issues they are facing, others grow more confident they are what they say they are and that they can be counted on.

Intentions

Highly effective coaches have the best intentions for those they coach. They accept people for who they are — brilliant, wonderful gifts to the planet — and want them to succeed. Jim Meehan, British psychologist and poet, puts it this way: "Having spent many years trying to define the essentials of trust, I arrived at the position that if two people could say two things to each other and mean them, then there was the basis for real trust. The two things were 'I mean you no harm' and 'I seek your greatest good'" (Covey, 2008, p. 80). The best coaches' motives are other-centered.

TAXES AND DIVIDENDS

Trust takes time to earn and can be destroyed almost instantly. Covey uses the idea of taxes and dividends to explain.

Positive, high levels of trust in relationships with others and in organizations produce joy, effortless communication, transparent relationships, and high levels of energy — dividends. Organizations with low trust relationships have unhealthy working environments, hostility, guarded communication, defensiveness, and constant worry and suspicion (Covey, 2008, pp. 22-24).

Feeding trust results in greater dividends, while mistrust taxes everyone and has long-term costs to relationships. Effective coaches strive to constantly earn dividends with those they coach.

Covey outlines four ways leaders build dividends:

- **Inspire trust.** Believe in others' capacity to live up to expectations, to deliver on promises, and to achieve clarity on key goals. Avoid micromanaging and second-guessing.
- **Clarify purpose.** Involve others in creating the goals to be achieved. When people are involved in the process, they psychologically own the goals and share the mission, vision, and values.
- **Align systems.** Match what is said to what is measured. Organizations often claim, for example, that people are important but have structures and systems that identify professional learning as an expense or cost rather than an asset and investment in their people.
- **Unleash talent.** Empower others by aligning systems and developing a shared purpose. When people feel empowered, the organization benefits from their capacity, intelligence, creativity, and resourcefulness.

CORES OF CREDIBILITY

Stephen Covey emphasizes building trustworthiness through four cores of credibility:

- **Integrity:** Are you congruent?
- **Intent:** What's your agenda?
- **Capabilities:** Are you relevant?
- **Results:** What's your track record?

Source: Covey, 2008.

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